

The Loss of Identity in Mediterranean Architecture

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Traditional village in Tinos, Cyclades, Greece

1. *To feel one's bonds with the earth, one's love for certain men, to know that there's always a place in which one's heart will find harmony is certainty enough for one life (...). I have learnt that there is no supernatural happiness, nor eternity beyond the bends of the day. These trifling and essential treasures, these relative truths are the only ones that move me.*

Albert Camus



Through history, real needs and different cultures have determined architectural and territorial spatial structures which express, each in its own way, "a certain total immersion of man in a specific environment (...). This involved not only materially adapting to the morphological conditions, weather and vegetal species of that area, but also a spiritual, aesthetic and religious communion induced by the landscape, its forms and the messages it conveyed".¹ Symbols, the calligraphy of architecture and landscape, emphasise these differences. Like language, they become the essence of our cultural identity and collective personality: they are the tools with which we enter into immediate and direct contact with a place and with the society that expresses its "autobiography" in that place.

Right: Detail of a dovecot in Tinos, Cyclades, Greece

Every culture lives and is defined by an ongoing dialogue with the natural environment which psychologically affects mankind. In fact, since different landscapes (here meant as images of natural environments) correspond to different geographical areas, we can say that different landscapes give rise to different human reactions. Since the sum total of our individual behaviour influences our social behaviour, then different landscapes correspond to different cultures or specific variations of the same culture. The various ways in which man treats the land in different parts of the world - the variations he creates or the symbols that emerge in the landscape - depend on the symbiotic relationship between environmental identity and the identity of the social group. When man modifies and builds, he exploits his knowledge of the mechanisms that govern the natural order to penetrate nature. By "naturalising" his actions he "humanises" nature, culturally annexing it to his own world. So landscape can be considered as the "concretisation" of a special "way of being" that is articulated in the multiple relationships which bind man to the natural environment and the society in which he lives. These relationships are expressed by a series of symbols which are linked and relate to other symbols, creating a unique "structure." The internal coherence of this structure characterises the landscape and makes it recognisable. In fact, the landscapes we feel are more

"communicative" are those that have a certain harmony which becomes a formal quality that is basically an expression of the evolution of life.

In yesterday's stable societies, people and riches moved very slowly because life was economically bound, tooth and nail, to the land. Later on, the industrial revolution spawned a cultural revolution in the true sense of the word. A revolution that eroded the core values upon which society was based: traditional social hierarchies, the way in which work and communities were organised, man's relationship with the natural environment and the role of families as well as religious and social communities.



3. Terraces with olive trees in Tinos, Cyclades, Greece

This historical evolution has created a world that has its own advantages, but at the same time, it has created a new alienation due to the loss of psychological and physical reference points which in the past were linked to that sense of belonging to a certain social or cultural group – and so to a certain system of needs and values – and, consequently, to identification with specific "places" that were the physical expression of that particular group. Even if many technological and structural successes were achieved during this period of epochal change, we could call the process that was set in motion the "dehumanisation" of architecture, culminating in buildings that symbolised absolutely no feeling of identity whatsoever. From the very beginning, the aim of the Modern Movement was to be universal: its declared intent was to break with the past and to create a new architecture that was to be based on a common style dictated by the rationality of the industrialised world and the indiscriminate use of its products which, thanks to simple production methods and rapid exchange mechanisms, lost their link between specific materials or places of origin. The loss of history and this separation from the site can be considered as two big "voids", afterward concretised and exasperated by the universal success of a kind of modern architecture, "homogenising" and

devoid of relationship with the contexts specificities, whose style rapidly spread to the four corners of the earth. Cities and land change, but rather than replacing the traditional urban landscape, this new architecture absorbs it by eliminating its meanings and creating new ones. It no longer expresses different cultural systems, but only the rules that now govern the economy.

The breathtaking success of IT technology and the current acceleration in the exchange of information contributes to this wide-spread state of "atopy". The new speed and ways in which we communicate affect the disintegration process of cultural and spatial frontiers, causing cultural homogenisation and the birth of a sort of supremacy of Western and American culture seen as the symbol of well-being and modernity. This supremacy means that, at best, ethnic, local and traditional cultural specificities are considered folkloric and consumer-oriented. The way in which our spatial-temporal perception has changed is reflected by the breakdown in the relationship between man and the natural environment. The "compression of time" caused by the compression of space brought about by rapid transportation creates a barrier between man and nature. Gone are the slow rhythms of nature, replaced by anthropical dynamism that makes the landscape a sort of "show" in motion, very different to the landscape of the past, "the motionless landscape with its trees, sown fields, still hamlets in the background and infrequent figures moving along dusty, white roads".²



4. The flat roofs of the houses of Serifos, Cyclades, Greece

The Mediterranean basin has always been considered one of the largest areas of cultural creativity, a natural barycentre of numerous civilisations that continually dialogued with one another. Unfortunately, it is also a perfect example of the sad reality described above: a

hiatus in the search for new styles which gives free rein to transformations totally estranged from this dialogue and their historical and natural contexts. This creates "no-places" and the fact that so many metropolitan suburbs and most tourist structures are unrecognisable. The "identification" and "orientation" processes become increasingly difficult because "the settlement, as a place in nature, no longer exist: urban towns are no longer areas of communal life and buildings are no longer important sub-places capable of transmitting individuality or a sense of belonging".³

The intense changes in the landscape that have taken place in the last ten years have further reduced the intensity of the bond between space and the landscape, wiping out old reference points and ancient memory, thus provoking a sense of loss and disorientation in those who identified themselves with this bond. These are the bonds that make us who we are, a vital part of our DNA: loosing them has negative psychological effects on the individual. This premise has recently motivated people to re-view history with a renewed interest and sensitivity towards sites and places: the current, widespread Atopy is increasingly challenged by a new awareness of the importance of safeguarding the landscape and the environment built as a container of collective territorial memory, as a way to bear witness to diversity, and therefore identity, in order to preserve or revive man's sense of belonging to a certain "way of living," to certain "places" and certain cultures.

To fight Atopy in architecture means to find another way of designing architecture, new project parameters that will create new architecture, new spaces with "place" values that are in keeping with the historical contexts: they will serve to protect the landscape and cultural diversities that are at the heart of man's sense of belonging. In fact, as emphasised by Pierre Von Meiss, "a building can no longer be built anywhere, it has to *try and find an alliance with the earth* (...). Previous limits contributed to creating consistency with the constructed environment and its universal relationship with nature (...). Once free of these limits, we have to find out whether, if we want to restore peace between what we build and mother earth, other tools are necessary to turn cities into a "mass of places." One promising path is to understand the land's shape and history as a prelude to an architecture which, instead of "disguising itself" or feigning ignorance, pays tribute to the fundamental characteristics of a site (...). If material constructions are not enough to achieve the harmonious occupation of the land, they will at least have to be *ethical*".⁴



5. House in Skyros, Sporades, Greece

This is why it is so important to stop historical and architectural memory of one of the most important cultural areas of the world being eclipsed by an inundation of building homogenisation. We have to establish what we mean by "Mediterranean" because this will help us create new architectural styles, more open and responsive to dialogue, that are respectful of the original culture and are focused on developing contextual continuity.



But where should we look for the characteristic traits of a "Mediterranean matrix"? The common elements and profound differences of the cultural area of the Mediterranean are clearly visible in European, Arab, Turkish and Balkan settlements, in other words in the three cultural continents that share the same sea. The idea of a common background will therefore have to be sought in the multiple identities that are part of this complex scenario, whose most important aspect has always been a continuous and diffuse process of transformation and anthropical construction of the natural environment, making the landscape "a fragile landscape, entirely created by the hand of man",⁵ in which human

intervention was never invasive, but designed the territory by enhancing its natural characteristics and "intensifying" the land's diversification. This continuous adaptation to the features of the natural site is a characteristic shared by all the cultures around the Mediterranean basin. So it's no use looking for the traits that express this sense of belonging to a "Mediterranean matrix" in big cities or districts of metropolitan areas, in the countryside currently being urbanised or the sprawling suburbs, because these are so different to the state of harmony and balance that exists between the natural and anthropic environment. It is easier to search for that special Mediterranean "spirit of the site" in "smaller" places, in small towns, considered both physically, as land surrounded by water, and as places that are off the beaten global track that cancels diversity. In fact, in the so-called marginal places it is material reality – the built environment – and life – meant as culture, behaviour and moods – that still portray a more truthful and synchronous vision of the man-environment relationship. So finding traits and values is the necessary prerequisite to imagine new ways to recover and use the resources of the different Mediterranean landscapes. By discovering how to attribute meaning to the symbols that exist, we will be able to enhance and develop the various landscape and architectural diversities of the Mediterranean, designing a new architecture as an answer to a modern system of needs and values. This system, however, has to be based on the analysis and understanding of the cultural dynamics and aims that created it, to realise a continuity between the past and the present, a detail that, up to now, has been all too often ignored.

6. Above right, street of a traditional village in Sifnos, Cyclades, Greece

THE ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

GERARCHIE

1. *La polis è più importante delle sue parti,*
2. *La parte è più importante d'ogni sua parte.*
3. *Il predicato lo è più del predicante*
4. *e l'arrestato lo è meno dell'arrestante. Il tempo s'infutura nel totale,*
5. *il totale è il cascame del totalizzante,*
6. *l'avvento è l'improbabile nell'avvenibile,*

il pulsante una pulce nel pulsabile.

HIERARCHIES

1. *The polis is more important than its parts*
2. *The part is more important than each one of its own parts.*
3. *The predicate is more important than the predicating*
4. *and who's captured is less important than who captures.*
5. *Time futurises itself towards the whole,*
6. *the whole is the waste of the totalising,*
7. *an advent is the unlikely in what is possible,*
8. *what is pulsating, a flea in what may pulsate.*

Eugenio Montale

The creation of this continuity becomes possible only if we carry out a spatial and cultural interpretation that tries to detect the meanings that lie behind the traditional landscape and built environment, in other words, we have to carry out a semantic analysis of the site: the

interpretation of the signs that characterise a site allow us to understand the concepts that governed past settlements as well as the principles of the various building techniques, at the different scales on which man operated.

Recognisability and sign are dual entities: a sign is the element recognised by man who uses it to find his bearings and with which he can identify. Man experiences the built environment as a "communication fact":⁶ this allows us to establish an analogy between the structure of the production process of the built environment and the structure of linguistic process, between the architectural system and the system of signs: landscape is formed by many recognisable signs and can be equated to a sort of language, or *langue*, which can be considered as the way in which a society lives and territorialises nature by exploiting its modificatory action. But just like a word acquires meaning and importance only in relation to the whole speech, so too the interpretation of the anthropised environment cannot be based only on single elements, isolated through decomposition, but on the context/text, in other words, on the way in which each element is functional and important because it is part of a whole.



7. Traditional house in Sifnos, Cyclades, Greece

To understand the built environment as a "written page", it is necessary to identify syntactic rules, that is to decode the process that created particular spatial relationships between the signs of the system. Then, we have to understand the semantic meaning of these signs, which lies in the cultural relationships that carried to a determined "existential taking", in other words to a determined way of humanizing natural environment and hence to the determined system of behaviours which generated that particular coherent structure of signs. Therefore, the analysis should be carried out at two different levels, adapting the distinction made by De Saussure to the architectural field: the first phase should consist in a synchronic analysis of configurations (meant as structures of signs) and spatial relationships, while the

second phase should consist in a diachronic analysis aimed at detecting the cultural and social mechanisms that generated configurations in the course of time.

For the first analysis phase, we can identify some categories of signs corresponding to particular human activities which are valid for every culture: the signs of human mobility, the signs of settling (linked to human sedentariness), the signs of economic and agricultural activities, the indirect signs of environment degradation and preservation. So, every sign is the expression of the relationship between cultural motivations and natural environment: in fact, the second analysis phase should be aimed at detecting these cultural "reasons", and their link with the anthropic signs.

The analysis of the configurations structures should be based mainly on the visual experience, for sight is the most important sense through which man perceives landscape and architecture. We know that "visual image, even though subjective and filtered by one's sensitivity, however sets off the constitutional characteristics of environment, according to the importance and the objective singularity of each element".² As demonstrated by the Gestalt theory, some forms are more meaningful than the other ones, and when we see something we haven't free choice in perceiving the image, that is some elements have a greater perceptive weight than the other ones. Therefore, we can use the concept of "iconeme" introduced by Eugenio Turri, who says that the discernment of elements "is never random, chaotic, an accumulation only, but is led by reason, which hierarchises objects (...). By working, perception catches some images, fixing and memorizing them, making them the main images of the whole vision. These images which make up the landscape are the iconemes (...), the basic units of perception: the images which represent the whole, expressing its peculiarities and representing its most distinctive and identifying elements. (...) They are like phonemes, the basic sounds of a speech. (...) Iconemes represent the leitmotiv of a pays, of a land, in other words they express the constitutional elements, the nodal points of an organised space, which takes from them its homogeneity and cohesion of warp".⁸



8. Fishing village in Tinos, Cyclades, Greece

Therefore, the iconeme is that element which embody more than the other elements the "genius loci" of a land, for it is "a strong visual and semantic reference mark of the cultural relationship that a society establishes with its own territory".⁹

The perception of iconemes, and so their analysis, changes according to the observation scale, that is according to the distance between the object and the observer. Therefore we have to carry out an analysis of the anthropic environment at three levels of scale, starting from the whole landscape, meant as the combination of both its natural and built areas, passing through the urban settlements and finally arriving to the analysis of the house and its interior. At every level of scale, iconemes are always what we can call "strong points" of attraction and concentration, the lines and axes, some particular patterns. In other words, it is necessary to carry out a topological and configurational analysis of the structures at the landscape, the urban and the architectural scale.



9. *"Dammuso" in Pantelleria island, Italy*

As "topological analysis, we mean an analysis of the position of the element of a configurational structure: this study gives informations about the geometrical nature of the elements, regardless of their "quality", in other words, of their perceptive and rhythmic features. Instead, a "configurational analysis" is aimed to explain the effects of perception in valuating the structural features of a configuration components. On the base of the the Gestalt categories, we can assign a "weight" – i.e. the dynamic energy of an object according to its evidence, dimention, etc. – and a "direction" – defined by Arnheim as a structural property of the element itself, for "the shape of the objects create a direction along the axes of their own structural frame" - to every element of a configuration. Therefore, the configuration balance takes form both according to this "field of directions", and to the factors which determine the perceptive weight:

the spatial depth;

the relative dimentions;

the colour;

the ability to draw the attention of the observer;

the compactness;

the shape and configuration;

the relative isolation.

Hence, a pattern weight is primarily a function of its own position within the structural frame. But both the concentration degree of a mass and the closure degree of a space are too of

primary importance in order to distinguish an area from its context and to put it in relation with the other ones in the visual field. The variables which condition the concentrations degree of a mass or the closure degree of a space are:

the ability to connect to other elements;

the constancy phenomena;

the angles treatment;

the openings treatment;

the delimiting surfaces treatment.

To carry out a topological and configurational analysis at the landscape scale means to detect the tissue of the agricultural fields and the shape of their boundaries, the way of integration of the built in the surrounding natural environment, analysing both the position of the settlements within the macro-components of the natural landscape, and the topological relationship between each settlements and the other ones. In this phase of analysis, the dimension of the settlement is obviously of less importance than their position within the landscape, for we have to detect the "fields of strength" and the role of the attractive elements, considering only the relationships between the object, not the features of the single objects.



10. "Trulli" in Alberobello, Puglia, Italy

At the urban scale we have to analyse the planimetric typologies of settlements and their orientation, the ways and their hierarchy, the main configurational elements and how dwellings aggregate to form the settlement. It could be useful to carry out an analysis "through the ways", to define how social and religious spaces, as well as solid and void, alternate.

At the architectural scale aims to define the orientation and structure of the private inhabited space, and its recurring configurational and compositional elements – through a cataloguing of the typology of openings, materials, surface finishings, decorations and rythms.

We have mentioned two phases of analysis before, aimed to understand the built environment as a "written page". Till now, we have talked about the first phase, aimed to detect the spatial relationships between the signs of the "humanised" environment structure at three levels of scale, as we see and perceive it now. Yet this topological and configurational analysis has to be carried out together with an analysis of the "requirements field" which lies under these structures of signs, i.e. those cultural and social mechanisms that generated configurations in the course of history. In fact, every human work, from an agricultural boundary wall to a house, is made as an answer to a particular requirements system: these requirements determine a particular type of behaviours which needs a determinate equipped space in which to take place, in which to happen. The system of requirements - i.e. both the natural and the superstructural ones,¹⁰ the first ones meant as the requirement of a sheltered space and the last ones meant as the image of the space proceeding from the cultural parameters of a society – produces a system of aims, which define a determinate spatial structure. Hence, every configuration expresses behavioural functions (first functions) and ideological, social, political, economic and aesthetic functions (second functions). Therefore, a definition of the requirements field of a structure is necessary to understand it completely.



11. *Traditional village in Morocco*

THE "ENVIRONMENTAL CULTURE" OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SPONTANEOUS ARCHITECTURE

1. (...)
2. *till the stone eyes look again seaward*
3. *The wind is part of the process*
4. *The rain is part of the process*
5. (...)
6. *will never be more now than at present.*

Ezra Pound, Pisan Cantos, LXXIV

Nevertheless, the construction of an architectural structure is based not only on functional parameters, but even on determinate environmental requirements, mainly "geographical", caused by the need to control climate (temperature, wind, rain), sunlight and sounds.

Since the Industrial Age, the architecture has progressively lost the sense of belonging to a determinate climatic context, becoming completely independent from the natural environment, and losing those "bioclimatic" features which were distinctive of "spontaneous" architectures. The so called "spontaneous architectures", in fact, are often precious models of structures which work as self-regulating biological organisms, ranking as a mediation element between environmental features and human requirements.

By "environmental culture" of the Mediterranean we generally mean an approach to architecture based on the interaction between the material, energetic and cultural resources of the site and the functional, structural and linguistic layout of the architecture. The pre-modern architecture environmental culture may be defined as the body of knowledge and techniques which create the symbiosis of architecture and nature. This symbiosis manifests itself in the correct relations between the site features and the buildings and public spaces shape and orientation, as well as between the environmental agents and the constructive and functional features of the buildings. The environmental features vary according to the different sites, but always within well-defined thresholds, beyond which the architecture no longer establishes an alliance with the nature.

The environmental culture is regional, however we can still talk about a "Mediterranean" architecture. In fact, there is a unifying factor, namely the climate, so-called "Mediterranean", which involves the "Le Corbusier climatic belt", i.e. the geographic belt which stretches from Portugal to Greece, passing over the whole Mediterranean coastline and over the islands, from Gibraltar to Cyprus. This "belt" is characterised by dry summers and mild winters, as well as by daily broad thermal ranges. This type of climate brings to a bioclimatic model which meets the need of cooling for both the open and the covered spaces: this model is valid all through the Mediterranean basin, while the buildings' morphologies vary according to both the cultural factors and the climatic changes.

The Mediterranean classical and "spontaneous" settlements developed mainly on correctly orientated slopes – south, south-east, south-west – where they could better use the local climate as an air-conditioning and lighting source. In fact the routes, which generally develop on

several height levels, permit both a good insolation for heating the buildings in wintertime and a good permeability to the prevailing winds which cool the streets in summertime. On the contrary, most modern settlements have preferred to plan – climatically disadvantageous but much more useful for the economy - more topographically complex sites that cancel the relationship with the genius loci, which so deeply characterised the old urban and rural realities.

In order to halt the increasingly widespread loss of identity in the Mediterranean anthropised environment, we architects, before all others, must feel responsible and work to ensure that both the history and the cultural and environmental reasons which produced the architecture and the genius loci of these places – nowadays cancelled and replaced by awful buildings which have no relation with the context and the real needs of the inhabitants - are rediscovered and understood by populations and local authorities. In order to make the revitalisation of this architectural heritage possible, we must use methodologies which allow us to fully understand the values and the tensions which have been, from age to age, at the base of the construction of the Mediterranean space, always characterised by a widespread humanisation of the environment close to and in respect of natural elements. Assuming these design principles, we will be able to create and realise new spaces and a new architecture which will link to the past and manifest again the essence of different Mediterranean contexts.



12. Houses in Mijas, Spain

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